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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0349

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY 0937

RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 1733

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 1951

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001879

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/27/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PARM SY IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: BERRI PUTS BALL IN MARCH 14'S COURT

REF: A. BEIRUT 1860

1B. BEIRUT 1855

1C. BEIRUT 1854

1D. BEIRUT 1852

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Classified By: DCM William Grant for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Speaker Berri, still blaming others for failed efforts to reach a consensus president, now insists it is up to March 14 to make the next move, according to an advisor. Refusing to convene parliament absent a consensus, the Speaker continues to reject the possibility of a half plus one or even "half plus plus" president. With no feasible consensus candidates on the horizon, the only other option is someone who can "break" Aoun, such as...(drum roll please)...Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Michel Sleiman. End summary.

12. (C) Pol/Econ Chief and Senior FSN Political Advisor met with Ali Hamdan, advisor to Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, on November 27. Hamdan was not aware of March 14's contemplation of electing Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman as president. An unusually grumpy Hamdan began by criticizing the U.S. for what he (and Berri) viewed as its obstruction in getting "consensus" candidate Michel Edde elected president and for accusing Berri of trying to "squeeze" the Sunnis regarding Edde. Aoun was the problem, and Berri and the opposition had finally found a candidate that Aoun would accept, but the U.S. told majority leader Saad Hariri not to accept him. Now Berri had "stopped working" and was waiting for March 14 to come up with a solution. Meanwhile, the U.S. had what it wanted: a presidential vacuum, with the Siniora government in charge. And support for Aoun was growing by the day.

13. (C) Pol/Econ Chief responded that the U.S. had not vetoed Edde or any other candidate, but it did not view him as a "consensus" candidate when the leader of the parliamentary majority, Saad Hariri, refused to accept him. The U.S. did not believe that putting all the pressure on Hariri to concede to a candidate he perceived to be against Sunni interests constituted a consensus. Hamdan said Hariri had stalled the process for two months by insisting on Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh, and recently had held numerous meetings with Edde, suggesting that he was considering Edde

candidacy.

¶4. (C) On the way forward, Hamdan saw two possibilities. One, the two sides keep looking for a consensus candidate who has the support of "everyone from left to right", though Hamdan was at a loss to provide a name. Two, they find someone who could "break" Aoun. Asked to elaborate, Hamdan finally suggested Army commander Michel Sleiman, arguing that the Christians had always supported the army and would desert Aoun for Sleiman. Hamdan said he sensed a PM Siniora-Sleiman "partnership" in the wake of President Lahoud's leaving office, in terms of maintaining a calm security situation, and that he believed even Siniora would support Sleiman as president.

¶5. (C) Asked why parliament could not simply meet and vote on a candidate, perhaps one of the "consensus" candidates on the Patriarch's list, Hamdan immediately responded that a half plus one president would lead to major problems in the country. What if parliament managed to elect someone with more than half plus one, but less than the two-thirds the opposition insisted was necessary, Pol/Econ Chief asked. Still no good, Hamdan essentially replied; nothing but a consensus was acceptable, and Berri would not open parliament unless a consensus was reached. We would have had "over 100" MPs voting for Edde, he claimed, had Hariri not blocked it.

COMMENT

¶6. (C) First the Patriarch, then Siniora, now it is Berri, through his aide, claiming to be the victim of the failed French initiative's effort to find a consensus candidate. Berri has a talent for putting the blame on others. First the Christians, for not playing a leading role in selecting a president. Then the U.S., for not engaging the Syrians.

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Then, after the French brought the Syrians on board (a fatal trap, it now appears) and the Patriarch reluctantly agreed (against his wishes) to provide a list of names, Saad Hariri for blocking consensus. Also, again, the U.S. for failing to bring Aoun on board. Berri is now absolving himself of all responsibility and putting the onus on March 14. We can't help but point out, however, that, under the constitution, it is parliament's duty to elect a president. Berri, as Speaker, should be held to this duty and not be allowed to play victim, when in reality he has the keys to the solution: convene parliament and vote on a president.

¶7. (C) Part of Berri's bitterness, we suspect, is a belief that Presidents Sarkozy and Asad had agreed that President Lahoud would step down quietly, without appointing a second government, and in return he and his opposition colleagues would be guaranteed March 14 agreement for a consensus president. Instead, the opposition lost its president and is now seething at the fact that its despised enemy, PM Siniora, has taken the reins, while the U.S.-supported March 14 "angels" (as Hamdan called them) have given up nothing.

¶8. (C) The conversation with Hamdan indicates that the opposition as of now has not gotten wind of March 14's sudden interest in Sleiman. Nevertheless, when asked about the way forward, March 8 and March 14 intersect on one name: Michel Sleiman. Whether by coincidence or grand design, we seem to have come full circle, with, barring an unexpected consensus name dropping out of the sky or March 14 suddenly mustering up the determination to pursue a half plus one president, all roads leading to Sleiman. End comment.

FELTMAN